



# LISTENING TOUR



Families for Justice as Healing is working to end the incarceration of women and girls. Formerly incarcerated women led extensive interviews to document the experiences and expertise of the most impacted women from the most incarcerated neighborhoods in Massachusetts. We surveyed 95 women who are closest to the problem of incarceration and have solutions for how to reimagine and transform their own communities.

## WHO ARE THE LISTENING TOUR WOMEN

83% of the women live in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan and Hyde Park. Other neighborhoods that were represented include the South End, Jamaica Plan, Back Bay, Mission Hill.

85% of the women are Black  
5% of the women are Latinx  
4% of the women are White

Our findings represent the experiences of a population of women (Black and Latinx) who are over-exposed to the criminal legal system.

82% of the women we spoke with were between the ages of 35 – 64. The largest proportion of women are between 45 to 54 years old.

55% had been incarcerated in prisons and 41% in jails. Of those in prison, most had been incarcerated at MCI-Framingham, with a smaller proportion in federal prison in Danbury. Of those in jail, two-thirds had been in South Bay Correctional Center, with the rest at non-Boston jails.

Over half (56%) of the women who disclosed their income make less than \$25,000 per year. A substantial portion – 28% – make less than \$10,000. Almost two-thirds of the women we talked with receive some sort of public assistance, with SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) being the most commonly accessed assistance

Formerly incarcerated women are more than just their pain and struggle. They are artists, dreamers, businesswoman, licensed professionals, teachers, organizers, loving friends and neighbors. Women are the backbone of families, neighborhoods, and communities. Many women are mothers, grandmothers, primary caretakers and motherly figures. Many women are leaders in their community.

The women we interviewed have made, and aim to make incredible contributions to their communities. 95 formerly incarcerated women offered their brilliant expertise and visions for reimagining communities. Formerly incarcerated women have the solutions to transforming their neighborhoods.





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## KEY FINDINGS: POLICING

Women are arrested for surviving poverty, violence, and abuse, as well as for struggling with substance use, mental health and no support.

*"I was a young teen, single mom, affected by violence. No resources, no education, battling with mental health. I needed some support. I needed a hug. I needed some therapy. I needed some guidance. I needed someone to tell me I was not what I went through."*

The impacts and consequences of arrests can be longstanding. Arrests lead to significant disruption in women's lives.

We asked women to give us 3 words to describe how they have been treated by the police during arrests. 89% of women characterized police treatment as either disrespectful, humiliating, verbally abusive, unjust, inhumane, and/or violent.

These findings reflect the racist policing in Boston that targets Black and Brown women and girls. More than half of the Listening Tour women were arrested for the first time before they were adults (under age 18), and 78% of women were arrested before the age of 25.

*"I never thought that I would hear people saying that they been arrested for nothing – I didn't believe it. But now it's all about race, it's about our color, the color of your skin. People go to jail just cause they exist, just because of the color of their skin."*

**28%**

women had been arrested 1-3 times in their lives.

**25%**

women had been arrested 4-7 times in their lives.

**1 in 10**

women had been arrested more than 30 times in their lives.

Women who were arrested for the first time as a teenager were far more likely to be arrested more than 30 times in their lives compared to women whose first arrest occurred as an adult.

*"See what chaos happens when they arrest you? Then multiply that by 3 times arrested, by 12 times arrested, by 17 times arrested. Each time it diminishes your choices in life."*





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## REIMAGINING COMMUNITIES: POLICING & PROSECUTION DEMANDS FROM FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN

**Stop arresting women and girls.**

**Do not arrest girls under the age of 21.**

**Do not arrest women and girls for behaviors that are an attempt to cope with the trauma they have experienced in their lives.**

**Offer women and girls resources and services that will pull them out of poverty, heal their traumas, or support them with overcoming any addictions and obstacles.**

**Stop funding towards the Boston Police Department.**

**Create Community Oversight Board of police led by formerly incarcerated women. This board should have subpoena and firing power.**

**End racist policies and practices in the Boston Police Department.**

**Increase accountability of prosecution by creating oversight for judges and prosecutors.**



**Increase the use of alternative sentencing.**

**Expand the use of community based sentencing for Primary Caretakers Law.**

**Fund community-based programs that could serve as alternatives to incarceration for women.**

**Judges and juries should be instructed to acknowledge trauma as a reason for alternative sentencing.**

**End pretrial detention and supervision.**



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## WOMEN NEED HEALING NOT PUNISHMENT.

**We asked formerly incarcerated women, "What was going on in your life when you got caught up in the system? What did you need that you didn't get?"**

*"When I got caught up in the system, I was addicted to drugs, I didn't have family support, I didn't have a system to where I could go to anyone for help. I felt alone. My brother got caught up in the system in the same way. We were young, we got caught up at a young age. I was 15 years old, I didn't have any support. I didn't know who to go to."*

### SUBSTANCE USE

Out of 109 different circumstances that the women mentioned were happening in their lives when they got caught up in the criminal legal system, the most commonly mentioned issue was the illness of addiction. One in four responses (25%) had to do with substance use. Drugs and alcohol are both a response to stress and trauma and a precursor to criminal legal system involvement.

### POVERTY

Women did not have enough income for necessities like housing, food, children's needs or to achieve a better life. The largest proportion of women we interviewed – about one-third – were arrested for property crimes.

### MENTAL HEALTH

When women endure poverty, violence, abuse, PTSD, and childhood traumas, this often leads to mental distress. Many women expressed the trauma that they have experienced in their lives remained unaddressed.

### VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Many women reported surviving violence and neglect as children or had been in relationships where their partner was physically abusing them. Many women are survivors and punished for defending themselves.

### UNDER-RESOURCED AND UNSUPPORTED

Many women we spoke with talked about the need for love and guidance in their lives. One of the most commonly mentioned precursors to how women ended up caught in the criminal legal system is an experience of growing up in a home where they didn't have support, guidance, enough attention, or stability. In some cases parents were not present due to incarceration themselves, in some cases parents or caregivers were dealing with the same issues that our participants identified which did not leave them available for their children.



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## KEY FINDINGS: PROSECUTION

Pretrial incarceration does not help women overcome the conditions that led to their arrest; it exacerbates those conditions and creates further harm. Women make up over two-third's of the pre-trial incarceration population in MA. Women are separated from their families. Women lose economic opportunities and face more obstacles to live a healthy life. Women experience extreme strain on their emotional and mental health. The three biggest challenges that formerly incarcerated women expressed about pretrial incarceration were missing family, financial loss, and psychological trauma.

*"There are psychological implications of pre-trial period of time and prosecution, and it makes us sick. The conditions are awful - constant noise, constant 24/7 lights, and the not knowing what will happen. All of this puts you into a psychological state that is so unhealthy."*

Out of the 77% of women who were held on bail, over half paid a bail amount of \$1,500 or under. Given that 28% of women reported making less than \$10,000/year and more than half reported making less than \$25,000/year, the burden that paying bail places on women and their families is destabilizing.

*"I was using drugs and alcohol, and my life was a mess. No one was listening to me. I was hurting on the inside. I needed help."*

**28%** of women who could not make bail were incarcerated for 1 – 3 months before their court date.

**26%** of women were incarcerated for 1 – 5 nights before their court date,

**27%** of women were held between 6 and 30 nights.

**19%** of women spent between 4 months to 3 years awaiting trial.





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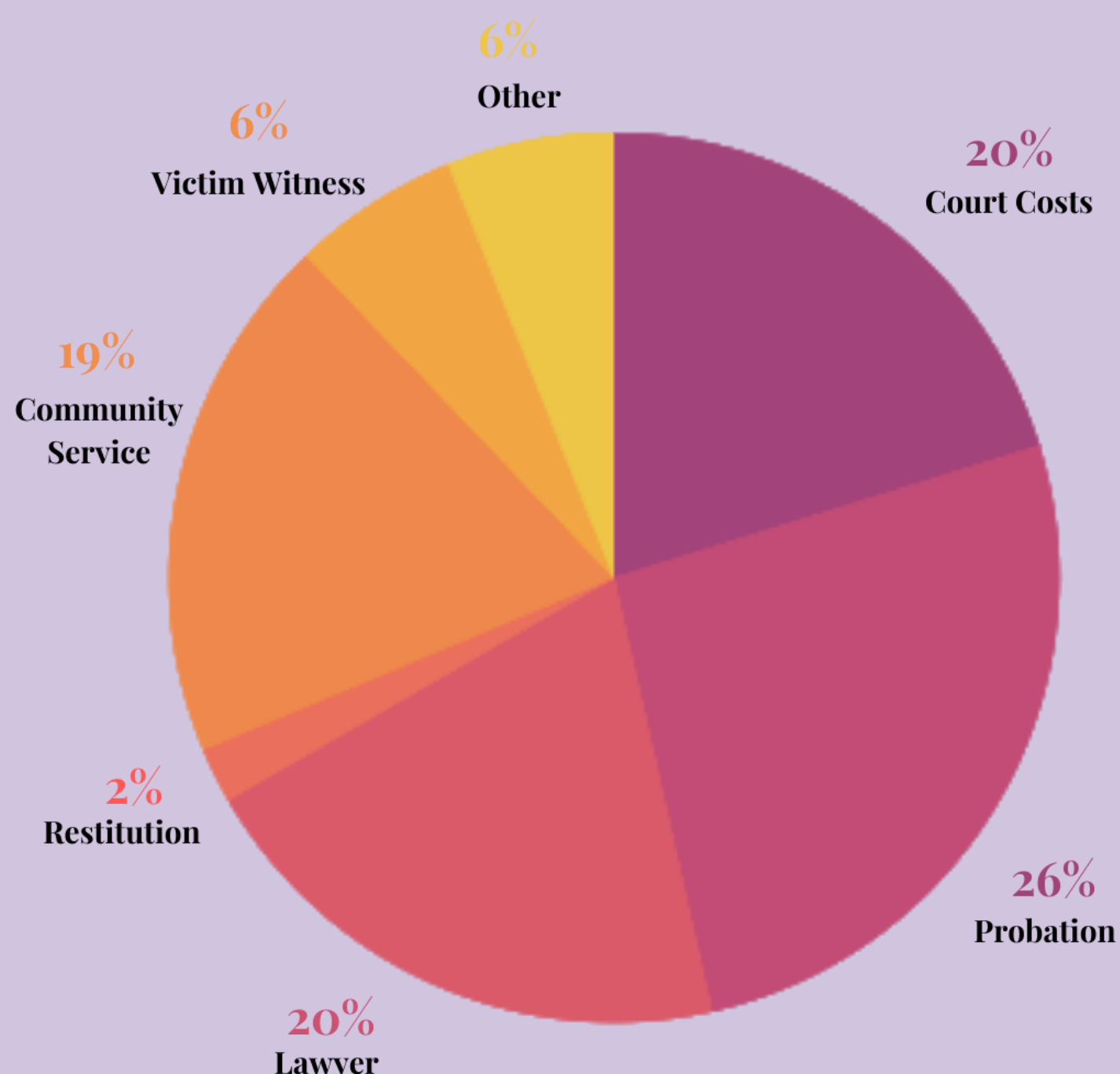
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## Pretrial incarceration is harmful and disrupts women's lives, no matter the length of time.

Women are immediately hit with the financial burden of pretrial incarceration. These financial penalties can lead to housing insecurity, missed job and educational opportunities, and extreme losses that cause further harm. Nearly half of women mentioned losing some form of stability, including Section 8 vouchers, employment, health insurance and other financial assistance, after their arrest.

*"I lost my housing. I lost my job. I lost everything."*

### Fines and Fees Women Paid During Prosecution



Among the women that we interviewed, 66% of the charges that women were convicted of were property, drug, or public order crimes (non-violent). Many of the women we talked with felt pressured into taking a plea bargain. One woman shared an experience of being pressured while she was sick from withdrawal from drugs:

*"If someone is under substances, first you're not using and dealing with detoxing, and then you're hit with a plea and pressure. It's an emotional ride. After [my court appearance] I was laying on the floor, sick in the cell [detoxing]."*

Several women talked about how the poor conditions in jails as a strategy that the criminal legal system uses to pressure a plea bargain.

*"The conditions of where you're being held [during pretrial], you just want to get to a better facility. Stagnant, no programs, constantly worried. You just want to hurry up and get sentenced. It's a form of intimidation. You just will take any deal to get out of it. Women have to stay twice as long in jail pretrial, where the conditions are awful, and it's a tactic to get people to plea out."*



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## KEY FINDINGS: INCARCERATION

Women can improve their lives – despite incarceration, not because of it. Prisons and jails do not heal women – women heal themselves. Women shared with us stories of transformation and survival during their incarceration.

Many women talked about how their experience of prison or jail led to more trauma, depression, and embarrassment. Many women spoke of feeling “humiliated” because of how they were treated throughout their incarceration.

*“I said [to the guard] ‘I know my rights,’ and he told me, ‘You don’t have no rights in here.’”*

Women shared many experiences of the violence and harassment from Corrections Officers. Almost one out of every ten responses was about abuse by Corrections Officers (CO’s).

*“I was treated like an animal my entire incarceration. I spent a whole year in MCI Framingham. You’re just treated like an animal most of the time and I don’t agree with that. You’re already sentenced to prison, you don’t need to be treated worse, you lose all of your freedoms. We’re not animals.”*



**Incarceration makes women poorer. Women were struggling with poverty before their arrest – and incarceration exacerbated the situation.**

*My family didn’t know where I was because I didn’t have any money on my books to make calls or let them know what had happened. They were worried because they didn’t hear from me for months.*

**1 in 5** of women in the Listening Tour told us that they lost Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits when they were arrested.

**1 in 10** of women lost their Section 8 voucher

**1 in 10** lost their Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

*It impacted me mentally, emotionally. It humiliated me. It was one of the most degrading experiences of my life. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy. That’s how bad it impacted me, that not even my worst enemy deserves to be put in a system where they have a lack of respect for human needs.*



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## PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Women shared experiences of pain, devastation, and heartbreak from being separated from their children. Women in the Listening Tour talked about the emotional turmoil of not being able to see or care for their children, of missing important milestones in their children's lives, of the guilt of "leaving my children to fend for themselves", and in some cases losing custody of their children. Women repeatedly shared their sadness and regret about the missed time with their children.

*"[Being incarcerated] took me away from my children for a long period of time, and that devastated me."*

1 out of 5 women were not able to communicate with their children throughout their incarceration.

*"It was very, very hard. [Being incarcerated] took me away from my kids – I had a small one at the time – who needed me to be there. I wasn't able to see them. I didn't want them to come to see me. The time that I was away was precious, precious time that I can never get back from them. I regret all of those decisions that I made back then that took me away from my kids."*

Of the eight women from the Listening Tour who were pregnant during their incarceration, two gave birth while incarcerated, one had a miscarriage, one had an abortion, and three were released before they gave birth. Both of the women who delivered while incarcerated were at Framingham. One woman stated she was shackled during labor, and one woman was not.

*Several years later, now that I see how my children were impacted. One through incarceration, where he was convicted of a crime that he's doing ten years. Also my other son was murdered due to gun violence. So I believe they saw me not being there as a parent, and me not being present, and being incarcerated. And the family raising my children – the cycle continued and it impacted my boys.*

**81%** of women we interviewed are mothers.

**29%** of women are primary caretakers of their children

**78%** of their children were under the age 10 when they were incarcerated.

**52%** of women were parenting or caring for children when they were incarcerated.

Family separation was the biggest challenge women shared about their incarceration. No attempt to create a trauma informed, or "better" prison could ever address one of the deepest pains that comes from incarceration.







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## KEY FINDINGS: RE-ENTRY

*"Once you're released, you start another sentence" – meaning that once you have been released from prison or jail, any little thing you do, you could be right back. It's scary and stressful over time. Every time the phone rings and I would see it was my P.O., I would just get really scared, "what did I do?"*

Out of 222 responses to the question about what types of assistance they received when reentering, a little less than half of those responses (47%) fell into the category of having received no assistance upon reentry at all. Out of all of the assistance received, only 14 of the responses women shared had received reentry programs or assistance from inside jail or prison – 0.06%. Almost 87% of the help that women accessed for reentry came from community-based organizations, advocates, and churches. Not the criminal legal system.

*"People who are incarcerated need more resources when they are out. It's not always just about a drug program that people need, they need resources on finances, how to get housing, and how to get jobs."*

Successful reentry needs to include support for reuniting with children and families.

*"[My incarceration] affected my family, I wasn't there for them when I needed to be. It caused a lot of chaos. I'm still dealing with trying to return the relationships, which is very difficult."*

Women talked about having to deal with the stigma of having been incarcerated. Some of the most overt examples of stigma are the ways that discrimination has been baked into laws and policies around housing and employment of formerly incarcerated people. Emotional stigma also is a real barrier to reentry.

*"Don't put that stigma on me that you're just an ex-con, or you're just a recovering addict and you'll probably use next week. No, give me an opportunity and stop going by my CORI to stop me from being the person who I am meant to be."*

**24%** of the women we talked with did not have a job or source of income

**56%** of the women make less than \$25,000 per year

**28%** of the women make under \$10,000 per year





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## BUILDING UP PEOPLE NOT PRISONS

**We asked formerly incarcerated women, "What does a thriving community look like to you? And how do we get there?"**

*"How can I say this without you thinking I'm a dreamer..."*

*"A thriving community is one where there are resources to fix the oppression that has been done in communities like mine – the communities in poverty, all of the Black communities where they have made a system to keep us in place. It looks like resources to fix these injustices, to fix these traumas on every level. In order to stabilize us as a community economically."*

### RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITY

Women expressed the need for dignified and affordable housing, mental health and drug treatment services, access to spiritual outlets to heal, more educational opportunities, healthy and affordable food, more community centers, parks, and afterschool programs for youth.

### SAFE

Women elevated the importance of living in a community where people feel safe to walk around, where there are no gunshots, no substance abuse, and no sirens. Women described communities where there is peace, and people feel comfortable letting their children play outside.

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Women talked about a thriving community as one that works toward positive change – together. Over and over women spoke about the need to work collectively to better the community, and in a variety of ways including: policy, marches, organizing and volunteering.

### FINANCIAL WEALTH

Many women called for jobs that pay a livable wage and allow people not only to survive but to pay off debt, save for a house, and thrive. Women also spoke of resources where youth are taught at an early age how to handle and make money, and where people invest in locally owned businesses.

### UNITY AND CONNECTION

People overwhelmingly felt that a thriving community is one where people know each other, are connected, get along, communicate with and help each other.

### TREATED WITH DIGNITY

Women strongly want to live in a community where everyone is treated with dignity no matter their race, history of incarceration, income, who they love, what they look like, or where they come from.



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## REIMAGINING COMMUNITIES: RE-ENTRY DEMANDS FROM FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN

Increase access to legal resources and ability to vacate charges for women who are reentering

Increase minimum wage to a living wage.

Establish entrepreneurship incubator programs for formerly incarcerated women

Educate businesses that federal liability insurance exists to protect them when they hire formerly convicted individuals

Pass laws and implement practices that protect people with a record from housing discrimination in public housing, with housing subsidy programs, and in the market rate rental housing market

Local Housing Authorities must not evict people who allow their returning relatives or loved ones to live with them.

Increase assistance for people who are homeless, who are living unhoused, or who at risk of homelessness, particularly if they are newly released from prison or jail.

Reentry services must provide dignified housing and earlier in the process of reentry planning.

Increase access to educational opportunities

Free tuition and student loan forgiveness.

Invest in community led solutions created by formerly incarcerated women, such as Kimya's House.



New Beginnings Re-Entry Services, founded by Stacey Borden, delivers evidence-based treatment for women involved in the criminal legal system and formerly incarcerated women and girls. New Beginnings operates "Kimya's House," a 15-bed re-entry program where women receive treatment, healing programming, job training, and deep connections to local community to heal and advance their lives.